

FRANK R. WOLF

10TH DISTRICT, VIRGINIA

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

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CO-CHAIR—TOM LANTOS
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

September 28, 2010

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The Honorable Barack H. Obama
The President
The White House
Washington DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I have enclosed a copy of a letter from a constituent who is the mother of six children, all of whom are currently serving or have served in the U.S. military. She offers her unique perspective on an idea I first proposed to the administration on August 4—namely the creation of an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group. I have also enclosed a copy of my original letter for your reference.

I implore you to consider my constituent's views—the views of an “American mother with children glad to serve our country,” and to move swiftly to establish an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group, modeled after the Iraq Study Group, to bring “fresh eyes” to the war effort in Afghanistan.

The group would be comprised of nationally known and respected individuals who love their country more than their political party and would serve to provide much-needed clarity to a policy that increasingly appears adrift. Candidly, after reading yesterday's *Washington Post* piece adapted from Bob Woodward's, “Obama's Wars,” I have serious concerns that the needed clarity about our aim in Afghanistan ever existed within the administration. Woodward writes, “Even at the end of the process, the president's team wrestled with the most basic questions about the war, then entering its ninth year: What is the mission? What are we trying to do? What will work?” These are sobering questions—but they are questions that must be answered and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group is just the means to arrive at these answers in a way that honors our men and women in uniform.

In the halls of Congress or the White House, at Foggy Bottom or the Pentagon, policy discussions can at times be detached from the actual lives that are most directly impacted by the decisions being made. This couldn't be further from the case for this mother. She doesn't have that luxury when it comes to the war in Afghanistan. And we mustn't either. This is not a matter of politics—or at least it ought not be—for it is always in our national interest to openly assess the challenges before us and to chart a clear course to victory. Frankly, I've been deeply troubled by Woodward's reporting which indicates that discussions of the war strategy were infused with political calculations. An Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group could help redeem what was clearly a flawed process.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

FRW:jf

You owe this
to the men and women
who are serving in
Afghanistan. I thank you

Dear Congressman Wolf:

I have read your proposal for the formation of an Afghanistan/Pakistan Study Group with deep personal interest and approbation. I applaud its respectful, well-reasoned, bipartisan approach to rethinking the war in Afghanistan. The following are my personal thoughts regarding this war. Please accept them as the insights of an average American mother.

It has been troubling to me how distant this war is for so many Americans. Many are only vaguely aware of the events taking place, other than perhaps the recent increase in the number of casualties. Even gathering information of what is daily happening in Afghanistan hasn't been easy. I comb the internet daily searching many different online news sources in an attempt to be informed. Our country is at war and yet so often the top news items contain nothing regarding it. Often it is the local papers in towns with soldiers, sailors and marines serving in Afghanistan that contain the most news. Other times it is the news stations with an embedded reporter who will have a flurry of articles while the reporter is there but then nothing once they return.

The War on Terror is not just impersonal news but it is a war that strikes very close to home. My father has a dear friend whose son-in-law died in the Twin Towers. I have a friend who lost a son in Iraq during the battle for Fallujah. A student of mine lost her fiancée in the war. My children and son-in-law have served in both Iraq and Afghanistan and have buddies injured or killed in action.

One of my daughters is currently serving in Afghanistan in a Combat Support Hospital. She arrived in time to experience first hand the peak number of casualties in June and July. In a recent news interview her Commanding Officer said they are seeing an almost constant stream of casualties; something that none of them were prepared for, but will remember the horrors of the rest of their lives.

It has sometimes appeared that the efforts in Afghanistan have trudged along, with success measured in part by the areas in which we have gained some measure of control versus the price paid in human lives both civilian and military. The casualties suffered aren't just numbers to me; each name, each face, represents a family who is paying the ultimate price, the loss of a son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother; a family that will never be the same. Therefore, I wholeheartedly support the formation of an Afghanistan/Pakistan Study Group in the hope that it will help to turn the tide of this war and lessen the number of casualties as well.

I, too, have a deep respect and confidence in Gen. Petraus and would not want my comments to be construed as being critical of the leadership of our military. I have no formal training in political science or history so please accept these comments as simply the perspective of an American mother with children glad to serve our country.

God bless you and give you wisdom as you serve in the leadership of our country.

Sincerely,

PS It meant so much to see my sons receive a standing ovation when introduced during last weeks luncheon. It is these very Lance Corporals, Corporals and Sergeants who are almost daily listed among the casualties. My son, [REDACTED], remarked that listening to your speech "restored his faith in the republic". Thank you again for recognizing their service.

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The Honorable Barack H. Obama
The President
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Dear Mr. President:

On September 14, 2001, following the catastrophic and deliberate terrorist attack on our country, I voted to go to war in Afghanistan. I stand by that decision and have the utmost confidence in General Petraeus's proven leadership. I also remain unequivocally committed to the success of our mission there and to the more than 100,000 American troops sacrificing toward that end. In fact, it is this commitment which has led me to write to you. While I have been a consistent supporter of the war effort in both Afghanistan and Iraq, I believe that with this support comes a responsibility. This was true during a Republican administration in the midst of the wars, and it remains true today.

In 2005, I returned from my third trip to Iraq where I saw firsthand the deteriorating security situation. I was deeply concerned that Congress was failing to exercise the necessary oversight of the war effort. Against this backdrop I authored the legislation that created the Iraq Study Group (ISG). The ISG was a 10-member bipartisan group of well-respected, nationally known figures who were brought together with the help of four reputable organizations—the U.S. Institute for Peace, the Center for the Study of the Presidency, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University—and charged with undertaking a comprehensive review of U.S. efforts there. This panel was intended to serve as “fresh eyes on the target”—the target being success in Iraq.

While reticent at first, to their credit President Bush, State Secretary Rice and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld came to support the ISG, ably led by bipartisan co-chairs, former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. Two members of your national security team, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and CIA Director Leon Panetta, saw the merit of the ISG and, in fact, served on the panel. Vice President Biden, too, then serving in the Senate, was supportive and saw it as a means to unite the Congress at a critical time. A number of the ISG's recommendations and ideas were adopted. Retired General Jack Keane, senior military adviser to the ISG, was a lead proponent of “the surge,” and the ISG referenced the possibility on page 73. Aside from the specific policy recommendations of the panel, the ISG helped force a moment of truth in our national conversation about the war effort.

I believe our nation is again facing such a moment in the Afghanistan war effort, and that a similar model is needed. In recent days I have spoken with a number of knowledgeable individuals including former senior diplomats, public policy experts and retired and active military. Many believe our Afghanistan policy is adrift, and all agreed that there is an urgent need for what I call an

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Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group (APSG). We must examine our efforts in the region holistically, given Pakistan's strategic significance to our efforts in Afghanistan and the Taliban's presence in that country as well, especially in the border areas.

This likely will not come as a surprise to you as commander in chief. You are well acquainted with the sobering statistics of the past several weeks—notably that July surpassed June as the deadliest month for U.S. troops. There is a palpable shift in the nation's mood and in the halls of Congress. A July 2010 CBS news poll found that 62 percent of Americans say the war is going badly in Afghanistan, up from 49 percent in May. Further, last week, 102 Democrats voted against the war spending bill, which is 70 more than last year, and they were joined by 12 members of my own party. Senator Lindsay Graham, speaking last Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union," candidly expressed concern about an "unholy alliance" emerging of anti-war Democrats and Republicans.

I have heard it said that Vietnam was not lost in Saigon; rather, it was lost in Washington. While the Vietnam and Afghanistan parallels are imperfect at best, the shadow of history looms large. Eroding political will has consequences—and in the case of Afghanistan, the stakes could not be higher. A year ago, speaking before the Veterans of Foreign War National Convention, you rightly said, "Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting...this is fundamental to the defense of our people." Indeed it is fundamental. We must soberly consider the implications of failure in Afghanistan. Those that we know for certain are chilling—namely an emboldened al-Qaeda, a reconstituted Taliban with an open staging ground for future worldwide attacks, and a destabilized, nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Given these realities and wavering public and political support, I urge you to act immediately, through executive order, to convene an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group modeled after the Iraq Study Group. The participation of nationally known and respected individuals is of paramount importance. Among the names that surfaced in my discussions with others, all of whom more than meet the criteria described above, are ISG co-chairs Baker and Hamilton; former Senators Chuck Robb, Bob Kerrey and Sam Nunn; former Congressman Duncan Hunter; former U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker; former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, and General Keane. These names are simply suggestions among a cadre of capable men and women, as evidenced by the make-up of the ISG, who would be more than up to the task.

I firmly believe that an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group could reinvigorate national confidence in how America can be successful and move toward a shared mission in Afghanistan. This is a crucial task. On the Sunday morning news shows this past weekend, it was unsettling to hear conflicting statements from within the leadership of the administration that revealed a lack of clarity about the end game in Afghanistan. How much more so is this true for the rest of the country? An APSG is necessary for precisely that reason. We are nine years into our nation's longest running war and the American people and their elected representatives do not have a clear sense of what we are aiming to achieve, why it is necessary and how far we are from attaining that goal. Further, an APSG could strengthen many of our NATO allies in Afghanistan who are also

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facing dwindling public support, as evidenced by the recent Dutch troop withdrawal, and would give them a tangible vision to which to commit.

Just as was true at the time of the Iraq Study Group, I believe that Americans of all political viewpoints, liberals and conservatives alike, and varied opinions on the war will embrace this "fresh eyes" approach. Like the previous administration's support of the Iraq Study Group, which involved taking the group's members to Iraq and providing high-level access to policy and decision makers, I urge you to embrace an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group. It is always in our national interest to openly assess the challenges before us and to chart a clear course to success.

As you know, the full Congress comes back in session in mid-September—days after Americans around the country will once again pause and remember that horrific morning nine years ago when passenger airlines became weapons, when the skyline of one of America's greatest cities was forever changed, when a symbol of America's military might was left with a gaping hole. The experts with whom I have spoken in recent days believe that time is of the essence in moving forward with a study panel, and waiting for Congress to reconvene is too long to wait. As such, I am hopeful you will use an executive order and the power of the bully pulpit to convene this group in short order, and explain to the American people why it is both necessary and timely. Should you choose not to take this path, respectfully, I intend to offer an amendment by whatever vehicle necessary to mandate the group's creation at the earliest possible opportunity.

The ISG's report opened with a letter from the co-chairs that read, "There is no magic formula to solve the problems of Iraq. However, there are actions that can be taken to improve the situation and protect American interests." The same can be said of Afghanistan.

I understand that you are a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln. He, too, governed during a time of war, albeit a war that pitted brother against brother, and father against son. In the midst of that epic struggle, he relied on a cabinet with strong, often times opposing viewpoints. Historians assert this served to develop his thinking on complex matters. Similarly, while total agreement may not emerge from a study group for Afghanistan and Pakistan, I believe that vigorous, thoughtful and principled debate and discussion among some of our nation's greatest minds on these matters will only serve the national interest. The biblical admonition that iron sharpens iron rings true.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,



Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

P.S. We as a nation must be successful in Afghanistan. We owe this to our men and women in the military serving in harm's way and to the American people.